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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON IRAQ, DECEMBER 5, 2003

1. Editorial in Tegucigalpa-based moderate daily "El Herald" on 12/5 entitled "Soldiers in Iraq and transparency". "The bloodless attack against the headquarters of our troops in Najaf, Iraq has reopened the debate among those who opposed the sending of Honduran troops to Iraq since the beginning, who are now demanding their immediate return, and those still think that it is reasonable to collaborate with the U.S. troops."

"Most of those demanding the return of our soldiers are those who oppose our participation based on legal or moral grounds. Also, there are some who initially agreed with our involvement in the coalition, but are now concerned that a tragedy will inevitably occur, just like the recent attacks against the Spaniards and Italians. There are also some opponents of our presence in Iraq who are motivated by their ideological background. They are those who are always against the U.S. and everything the government does."

"However, the main issue here is the lack of transparency from the Honduran government, because before sending our troops to Iraq, we were told they would be part of a peace mission and there were no risks involved. Some governmental officials even said that the presence of Honduran troops in that invaded country was in support of a mandate of the United Nations. "

"Since the sending of Honduran soldiers to Iraq was mainly a decision of President Ricardo Maduro, later backed by Congress, the only conclusion we can assume is that our presence in Iraq is unmistakably based on our full agreement with the U.S. foreign policy goals and other commitments of reciprocal support we have acquired with the world's most powerful country. We believe this issue must be properly informed to the Honduran people."

"We must acknowledge that the risks our soldiers are facing in Iraq are common in any war. Those who are using this excuse seem to forget that our troops were actually trained to fight, that they're known to be very brave, and if they return to Honduras shouldn't be because of fear. This should be a political decision to be taken at the highest level. Our authorities may have made a mistake by sending these troops, but now they can't simply back off. We wouldn't want to appear in front of the whole world as cowards, or that we are governed by hesitant politicians."

Palmer